'Don't Leave Before You Understand': Supporting Masters Candidates in Business Studies

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Abstract

Postgraduate studies in business faculties pose particular challenges to candidates who have come from practically-oriented undergraduate programmes, particularly those that adopt a 'technical-rational' approach towards the improvement of business practices or organisational efficiency. Research studies in the applied business fields usually expect that the candidate will take a more sociological approach, or be able to work within socio-historical or political frameworks (Hordern, 2014). Candidates who are enrolled for postgraduate business studies have to negotiate this complex transition. The focus of this paper is how candidates acquire the necessary academic and social practices for theorising their research, for conducting research activities and writing up their research findings in Masters level applied business studies. We selected candidates who had experienced difficulties throughout their Masters studies and who had successfully completed, or who were close to completion, despite initial difficulty for narrative interviews. The interview data were analysed with a view to establishing the practices that supported successful transition from practice-based undergraduate business degrees to postgraduate studies in the field. This paper concludes with suggestions for supervisory practices that have the potential to support successful postgraduate research in applied business studies.

Introduction

In the years following South Africa's first democratic elections, the South African higher education system experienced substantial growth in postgraduate enrolments. Graduation rates

for both Masters and doctoral programmes, however, have remained low (CHE, 2009a). Many candidates remain enrolled for their degrees for longer than desired, resulting in a 'pile-up' in the system; in fact nearly two out of five of all enrolled Masters students are recurrent enrolments (CHE, 2009b). There are a number of possible reasons for the low and slow graduation rate; for example, due to increased enrolments and the 'pile up' effect, South African academics are increasingly burdened with an unrealistically high number of postgraduate students to supervise (CHE, 2009b). In addition, many postgraduate candidates in South Africa (and internationally) are underprepared for research studies (Manathunga, 2005). Research findings have shown, for example, that many postgraduate students' information seeking skills are inadequate (Deem and Brehony, 2000). While it is acknowledged that there are many factors involved in the 'low and slow' graduation rate, it is the particular experiences of Masters degree candidates in applied business studies at various higher education institutions in South Africa that is the focus of this paper.

A range of different disciplines and fields are grouped together under the descriptor 'applied business studies', these include areas of business practice such as Business Informatics, Marketing, Tourism and Entrepreneurship, as well as management studies, such as Human Resource Management, Project Management, Retail Management and so on. Many of these areas are new or emerging fields and do not have strong research or supervision cultures. In addition, there is a significant transition from the more practically-oriented undergraduate areas of study towards stronger theoretical framing in postgraduate study in business studies (Hordern, 2014). These transitions are not usually given much consideration. For example, Masters level course work in the applied business fields is often taught by a different set of lecturers from the undergraduate teachers. Postgraduate course work teachers and research supervisors are usually active researchers in specialised fields. Thesis supervision (whether full thesis or part-dissertation), tends to be unconsciously framed by the supervisor's own theoretical orientation, sometimes with no, or very little, knowledge of the candidates' undergraduate field or level of preparedness. Thus the idea of induction into a discipline or field of study is marginalised at the postgraduate level.

This research study is part of a larger study on candidates' experiences of postgraduate business studies, with the aim of enhancing supervision practices for the benefit of candidates and for knowledge-building in the field. In this paper we focus on the experiences of four

Masters students enrolled for business studies at four different institutions. Our study seeks to understand the following questions: What has been the nature of the postgraduate student experience in business studies across different fields and in different institutions? What types of support do underprepared students in particular have (or need) to enable their success in postgraduate research?

Postgraduate candidates in applied business studies: underprepared and under-served

A difficulty facing many postgraduate supervisors is the level of preparedness for research in a specific discipline or field. Students' preparedness has to do with the type of schooling, or in the case of postgraduate study, the type of university education that candidates have experienced. Under-preparedness is associated with insufficient understanding of disciplinary concepts or field knowledge, difficulties with logical reasoning at increasingly abstract levels, and with difficulties in mastering discipline-specific varieties of English. Postgraduate study is demanding in a number of different ways: it requires not only advanced knowledge of the discipline or field, but abstract levels of logical thinking and reasoning, and high levels of linguistic ability (usually in English), involving discipline-specific reading and writing practices.

In South Africa, the vicious cycle of financial disadvantage, academic under-preparedness and under-performance that originated under apartheid continues to be evident (Letseka, Cosser, Breier and Visser, 2009). Underprepared students are often first generation students without the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970) that predisposes them to academic success (Holland, 2010). Candidates' socio-cultural practices, such as politeness levels and strategies, or norms of formality and informality, can create difficulties in the acquisition of academic discourses, such as argument, critique and debate in the arts and social sciences, or the terse, scientific styles of writing in the hard pure and applied disciplines (Gee, 1990). Typically, underprepared students speak home languages other than English, employ oral and written communication practices that are different from standard academic genres, and have few opportunities to acquire academic discourses.

The persisting inequalities in the school system have had a pervasive influence on undergraduate and postgraduate education. Many university teachers and researchers do not see it as their responsibility to address student under-preparedness (Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007). Many underprepared students thus are also under-served by university systems and by teachers,

who continue to offer a 'Western ethnocentric education' (Pearce, 2007) that assumes that the dominant group and its practices are always correct and that students need to 'shape up or ship out' (Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot, 2010). Yet, as Scott (2009) argues, the *status quo* is changeable, and university teachers can adjust their practices – from curriculum design to pedagogical arrangements in the classroom – in order to affirm the presence of a growing, changing and increasingly diverse student body.

A theoretical framework for understanding entry into an academic community

We draw on socialisation theory to analyse the experiences of postgraduate students. Socialisation theory is derived from theorists such as Durkheim (1922) and Merton (1942), who noted the relationship between norms, values and roles during socialisation. It is assumed that socialisation contributes to a stable society, based on the premise that social institutions and their shared norms, customs, values, traditions, roles, symbols and languages serve important social purposes, particularly with regard to providing individuals with the knowledge and practices necessary for participation in particular communities. It should be pointed out that socialisation is not a normative term; it describes a process (that is not necessarily beneficial or desirable).

In recent (postmodern) sociological studies, the concept of socialisation has been less central to debates, although the idea of socialisation lives on in how we think about education. Schools, for example, are often blamed for their failure to socialise individuals into the norms of academic study. Through a critique of functionalist ideas about socialisation in higher education in particular (e.g. Gasman, Hirschfeld and Vultaggio, 2008; Sato and Hodge, 2009; Schneider, 2009) there has been an increased awareness and affirmation of diversity in academic contexts, including, for example, increasing openness to multilingual practices or linguistic variation in the ways students express understandings of disciplinary concepts and practices.

Higher education is often a period of re-socialisation for young adults, a process of discarding former understandings and practices and accepting new ones as part of a life transition (Schaefer and Lamm, 1992). Re-socialisation can be an intense experience, as individuals break with the past and take on new norms and values. An example might be the experience of a student leaving school in her home town and enrolling at university where she has to learn to function in different kinds of academic and social roles.

Socialisation theory explains the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate education in terms of building advanced disciplinary understandings, increasing one's independence, and acquiring more complex literacy practices. At the postgraduate level, candidates must acquire new repertoires of habits, beliefs, and values, as well as appropriate patterns of emotional response and modes of perception in order to achieve academic success. But the uncritical handing down of academic norms and standards from one generation to the next, thus ensuring their persistence and continuity, is at odds with the goals of higher education – which is not to promote the passivity of the individual in the face of all powerful academic influences. Without acknowledging some sense of 'agency' or 'voice', or the individual's own activity in shaping his or her experience, our perspective of academic socialisation, particularly at advanced levels of academic achievement, becomes distorted. We use the term 'socio-academic' socialisation to describe what Berry (2002) calls:

> The processes by which one became a part of a group (for example, institution, department, etc.) and integrated with them, while possibly influencing the host group with one's own life experience and academic expertise, with regard to academic practices such as teaching, research, administration, pastoral duties, supervision and management.

Research design and methods

The research design uses narrative inquiry (Cousin, 2009) and develops a language of description from socialisation theory. The purpose of the study was to provide research data on variations in the postgraduate experience by exploring candidates' diverse perspectives and narratives. Postgraduate supervisors in applied business studies at four different universities helped us to identify candidates who had experienced difficulties throughout their Masters studies, as well as research candidates who had successfully graduated, or were close to graduation, despite experiencing initial difficulties. Selected students in both groups (i.e. those experiencing difficulties at the time of the study as well as those who had made significant progress or who had graduated) were interviewed. The primary data sources were thus the postgraduate candidates enrolled for a Masters degrees in applied business studies.

The narrative interviews were structured with what Cousin (2009) calls 'plot' questions, such as:

'Can you think of an episode in your postgraduate journey that stands out (negatively or positively, personally or academically)'?

'Can you comment on an event that changed how you thought or felt about something in your study?'

'Can you think of something that seemed trivial at the time but in retrospect was very important?'

'Do you have a sense of unfinished business about anything in your study?'

The questions were based on Cousin's 'plot questions' and then further developed, following a pilot study that helped the interviewees to focus on the role of enabling and constraining factors in the postgraduate experience. The same interview schedules were used with all interviewees. The questions were used as prompts; many of the candidates' narratives addressed many of the 'plot questions' without the interviewers' intervention.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and thematically coded, using a constant comparative method (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Two researchers coded each transcript separately and then met for the purpose of achieving consensus with regard to the categories. Following the coding and categorisation processes, we started to identify practices that could be described as 'enabling' or 'constraining' with regard to candidates' success.

All candidates completed consent forms in which they gave the researchers permission to use their interview data for scholarly purposes. We changed candidates' names, departments and subject specialisms in order to protect their identities.

We continue to collect data as part of an ongoing research project to improve supervision in applied business studies. In this paper we compare the experiences of two struggling candidates (Andile and Babalwa) with two successful candidates (Cumisa and Dumisani). All four candidates completed their schooling in rural, disadvantaged schools in the Eastern Cape. The four candidates then attended university (three completed undergraduate studies in the Eastern Cape, and one in the Western Cape) and all went on to enrol for Masters studies in fields of applied business studies (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Research participants

Name*	Age	Schooling	Undergraduate qualification	Field of Masters degree	Status	Years of study
Andile	30	Rural school, Eastern Cape	B Bus Sc	Business Informatics	Incomplete	4
Babalwa	34	Rural school, Eastern Cape	B Tech (Marketing)	Entrepreneurship	Incomplete	4
Cumisa	48	Rural school, Eastern Cape	Advanced diploma (Management)	Human Resource Management	Graduated	2 ½
Dumisani	38	Rural school, Eastern Cape	B Com	Project management	Graduated	2

*Names, gender and the specifics of the field of study have been changed.

Candidates' trajectories were not straightforward. Many candidates had 'stopped out' (Breier, 2010) a number of times in the transition from school to postgraduate enrolment in order to finance their studies and support families.

Findings: postgraduate students' experiences

The findings from the interview data fall into two main sections, firstly typical features of the postgraduate experiences (in response to research question 1), and secondly the support structures and mechanisms identified by the candidates for successful study (research question 2). There was considerable overlap between the two sections, which are presented separately for purposes of clarity. The candidates and graduates interviewed repeatedly conflated academic and

social issues. Although they were primarily involved in knowledge-building activities in their various fields of applied business studies, they were also being socialised into postgraduate practices within these academic communities – which extended beyond the supervisor and candidate. The interrelationship between the social and the academic was palpable to the extent that the researchers began to use the term 'socio-academic' to describe candidates' experiences and strategies.

Postgraduate students' experiences: academic and social isolation/participation

Two strong themes emerged from the candidates' narratives: 1) the importance of understanding and negotiating the academic context and its related social practices, 2) the supervisor/candidate relationship as a socio-academic encounter.

Socio-academic practices: from 'the textbook' to the application and critique of theory

The candidates interviewed were faced with both the academic challenges of postgraduate study and equally challenging social contexts, such as finding part-time work because of financial need, or dealing with geographical separation from family and friends. However, it was not so much these broader contexts and constraints that the candidates discussed in their narratives, but rather it was the particular practices and conventions of the disciplinary cultures that were highlighted.

The failure to understand the conventional socio-academic practices landed candidates in a number of predicaments. One of the reasons that accounted for the longer time spent by the less successful candidates had to do with long periods spent on proposal writing (in Andile's case one year, eleven months) and, in particular, the finalisation of the research focus and research questions (at the time of writing Babalwa had not yet developed a clear research focus and was stuck in a cycle of reading literature, writing a proposal and having it rejected by her supervisor). The challenges of the literature review, an area in which all four participants experienced considerable difficulty, has been well-documented in the postgraduate education literature (e.g. Deem and Brehony, 2000).

The candidates highlighted the importance of understanding institutional and departmental social contexts, such as how to access resources via the postgraduate office, how to obtain assistance from the subject librarians, how conference attendance can provide a good overview of the field and its direction, when the services of an editor would be useful, and the role that a network of peers can play in supporting the postgraduate endeavour. The specific academic knowledge-building practices that the candidates were expected to develop had their own social norms. Cumisa described embarking on postgraduate study as:

> *... coming into a new place... and I didn't know if I must do something in this way or that way.*

One of the taken-for-granted socio-academic practices that caused confusion was how, and when, to request a meeting with a supervisor. Cumisa explained that she was unaware that candidates were expected to send sections of work to the supervisor for feedback:

> *It took me a long time to realise that my supervisor was waiting for me to show him my work ... while all the time I thought it was the other way around.*

Candidates were conscious of being English second/additional language speakers, and found their levels of language proficiency not only a barrier to accessing academic texts, but also to accessing their supervisors. Babalwa explained that:

> *My English isn't good enough that I can meet with [my supervisor] and discuss those things that I am experiencing problems with.*

Successful candidates identified resources, such as websites, the postgraduate centre (many of which offered training on proposal writing), and subject librarians:

> *I was struggling to understand [a particular topic]...I didn't know how was going to cope with this task ... I went to the library and I asked someone at the desk there if there was anyone to help me ... you see I didn't use the library as an undergraduate so I didn't know the library ... only for the textbook ... but for my thesis the library helped me very much ... more than my supervisor ... these librarians became my supervisors ...* (Dumisani).

Students contrasted their experiences of postgraduate study with their undergraduate and school experiences, where the focus had been on the transmission of knowledge from the teacher

to the student, and the students' assimilation and reproduction of this knowledge. In postgraduate study the emphasis was on the students' application of theory to a new business practice – which required advanced literacy practices as well as independence, creativity and initiative. In undergraduate studies (as in Dumisani's case), students had been focussed on 'the textbook' and were not expected to critique these given texts; part of the transition to postgraduate study was a requirement not only to apply theoretical constructs, but to critique particular areas of theoretical knowledge. Understanding these different requirements was usually a first step in proposal writing and thesis development. Developing independence and confidence enabled the successful candidates to engage in the knowledge-producing practices of particular areas of business studies, while those who had not yet acquired these socio-academic practices tended to experience academic exclusion.

The supervisor and candidate relationship: from 'know how' to 'show how'

Much has been written about the importance of the supervisor/candidate relationship for successful postgraduate work (e.g. Manathunga, 2005). When the candidate is under-prepared for postgraduate research, the power differential between supervisor and candidate is exacerbated. Candidates described how feelings of confusion could be exacerbated by insensitive or unhelpful comments, as in these examples from the students' narratives:

> *He would just write … 'this is not sufficiently developed' on my work … I would feel upset and angry because I didn't know what he meant … what was I supposed to do to improve?* (Cumisa)

> *My supervisor's way of criticising everything [in written feedback] is very demotivating to me … there are many times that I feel like giving up … but [in face-to-face consultation] he says that this or that part is okay…so I don't know where I am* (Babalwa).

> *I felt that he was only marking my English and wasn't interested in what I'm trying to express* (Dumisani).

Postgraduate students' need for academic support and social connection

Themes regarding the significance of 1) mentoring within research supervision, 2) peer networks and 3) intra-personal competencies were most prevalent in the findings. Similar findings have been noted in studies on the postgraduate experience in a variety of contexts (e.g. Gasman, Hirschfield and Vultaggio, 2008; Syed, 2010). The frequency of these themes suggests that although each postgraduate student has unique experiences and faces different challenges, as a group they have many similar needs which relate to the intersections between academic and social practices.

The supervisor as mentor

The relationship between candidates and supervisors is central to successful postgraduate study. Supervisor feedback is necessary for the progress of the thesis, but the manner in which the feedback is given is particularly important (Sato and Hodge, 2009). Candidates valued clear, constructive feedback on their work, but expressed the need for additional follow-up on the feedback provided. Andile explains:

> *When [the supervisor] noticed an area of weakness on my side he didn't offer me help to correct it.*

Less successful candidates experienced a lack of specific, constructive feedback:

> *I don't know how to curb the knowledge gap in how I understand [an aspect of the research process]* (Andile).

Andile claimed to be looking for a new supervisor, one that *'has experience in the field and in the research process'* and who could *'create confidence and trust'*.

When social elements were ignored, this impacted negatively on the candidates' progress.

> *It's a general thing ... how you treat people ... that I as the student is respectful but also that [the supervisor] is respectful to me ... and sensitive to where I am coming from* (Cumisa).

Dumisani explained how he struggled with repetitive phrasing in his literature review, but did not know what to do about it until his supervisor assumed more of a mentoring role, and demonstrated how to incorporate literature into one's own text:

> *At first [the supervisor] would just write that this was boring to read or repetitive ... and I didn't know what to do to change it ... then he called me into his office and showed me on his computer how to write in such a way that I don't always ... use the same kind of sentence ... I could just say something as if I was stating a fact and then put the reference in after this ... that changed my way of writing* (Dumisani).

The more successful candidates had not only received encouragement from their supervisors, but also more practical support, such as demonstrating how to structure a literature review or showing a candidate how an argument is built and sustained. Supportive supervisors made candidates aware of a variety of additional supportive resources, such as training workshops and peer support groups; some supervisors had made arrangements for candidates to attend a conference in their field. It was these practical forms of support, as a follow-up to, or enrichment of, the supervisor's feedback that were particularly enabling of candidates' success.

Peer networks

The importance of peer networks for successful postgraduate study has been documented (e.g. Petersen, 2007). This study confirmed that it is not only students' relationship with their supervisors that contributed significantly to their academic performance, but also showed that relationships with fellow candidates were central in enhancing the postgraduate experience. Peer networks took various forms: from formal seminar groups to a variety of informal arrangements.

> *In [the postgraduate students' residence] we were always sharing our problems with other postgraduates and giving one another advice* (Andile).

Peer support ranged from moral support by colleagues undergoing similar experiences, sharing of practical knowledge and tips, sharing of resources (such as Internet access), informal training (e.g. on the use of an online site), help with planning a section of work, or the provision of feedback and review on written work:

> *If you have come from a disadvantaged place then your supervisor doesn't always know how much feedback you need so ... you don't learn and you can't move on to the next level ... [a peer reviewer] will be hard on you but he will make sure that you don't leave there before you understand* (Dumisani).

Individual agency

The successful candidates felt that a positive attitude towards the research topic and the field of study was needed in order to succeed.

> *My [diploma] was not in [my current field] … so at first I was thinking why am I doing this thing? It's so new and … difficult … but then I started to study more deeply … and I thought this is really quite… it's great … this is what I want to do … I started to see myself as [an expert in the field] … so I started to change my attitude … and I fell in love with my research* (Cumisa).

A number of acts of personal commitment were mentioned, such as making an effort to understand requirements, improving one's academic language proficiency, and immersing oneself in the academic culture and practices of the discipline. It is worth mentioning that the successful candidates generally held a positive attitude towards their academic studies, and attributed their success partially to personal values, such as being disciplined, consistent, reliable, and not giving up easily.

The less successful candidates had embarked on similar personal journeys, and were learning from their mistakes. Andile, for example, came to realise why it had taken him so long to produce a research proposal:

> *In my [4th year of undergraduate study] we didn't do a research project … then I realised that the other Master's students were better off because they had gone through this thing already … while for me it was the first time to come up with a research plan* (Andile).

Conclusion

The findings of the study are summarised in Table 2 below, which shows dimensions of transition to post-graduate studies in terms of disciplinary knowledge, research practice, literacy and values. Each of these dimensions has both academic and social components.

Table 2: The academic and social dimensions of enabling practices for successful postgraduate study

	Disciplinary knowledge	Disciplinary research practice	Disciplinary literacy	Disciplinary values, discourses, conventions
Academic practices	Understanding concepts and theories at increasing levels of abstraction; reading for understanding, for overviewing, etc.	Understanding what is researchable, achieving a research focus, developing an appropriate research design, selecting methods, etc.	Reading widely, understanding referencing as scholarly practice, avoiding plagiarism, quoting appropriately, adopting writing styles and conventions, etc.	Understanding, but also questioning what is valued, challenging accepted practices, conventions, assumptions, power relations, etc.
Social practices	Asking 'what' and 'where' questions; knowing where to find information; asking for assistance; finding out.	Asking 'how' questions, learning how to interact with a supervisor; how to follow up on feedback, how to explain needs; asking for guidance on specific issues.	Asking 'how' questions, learning to self-assess, self-correct, how to use technology, interacting with peers, asking for feedback, knowing when to ask for editing assistance.	Asking 'why' questions, disagreeing, debating, posing challenges.

The findings suggest that postgraduate supervision should be more focused toward providing access to the socio-academic practices that are necessary at advanced levels of learning, at least at the start of a research study. Supervisors' constructive feedback is necessary, but follow-up is even more necessary. There is no point in a supervisor requesting 'a more sustained argument' without following up with examples of what that means in the context of the study. Many of our findings are confirmed by similar studies, for example of African-American students in prestigious universities (Gasman, Hirschfeld and Vultaggio, 2008), non-traditional postgraduate students in traditional universities (Holland, 2010), or international postgraduate students (Sato and Hodge, 2009). These studies suggest that academic socialisation has its own characteristics which seem to differ from the acculturation process experienced by, for example, immigrants (Berry, 2002).

In our study, the students interviewed were extremely focused on their research, often to the exclusion of other things such as social time and wider engagement in university life. In students' accounts of their experiences, they felt that they had acculturated to disciplinary practices, but did not always feel that they were able to have any significant impact on disciplinary or department cultures.

> *Sometimes it's very frustrating ... I have worked with [an NGO that supports entrepreneurship in a rural community] for so many years ... but I cannot use my own knowledge ... instead I am struggling with this [theoretical approach] so I can get my degree* (Balalwa).

These experiences contradict the standard definition of socialisation in the literature (including our own definition of academic re-socialisation), which views the process as a two-way exchange. The Association of American colleges and universities (2008) argues that:

> Colleges and universities must collect and disaggregate data on all their students to answer critical questions and to advance their commitment to making excellence inclusive. They need to know how well students are doing, in what educational practices and programs they participate, what they say about their experiences, at what rates they progress and graduate, and whether they are thriving in the workforce and in graduate programs. These institutions must develop leadership for diversity work at all levels to make real progress.

Several undergraduate programmes are moving towards more inclusive educational practice to benefit all students with supportive versions of subject or disciplinary content (Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot, 2010; Schneider, 2009). More inclusive supervision practices would require supervisors to play more of a mentoring role (which has implications for the number of students a supervisor is able to accept). The provision of peer support networks of various kinds, for example, where more advanced research candidates can take on a mentoring and advising role, while a network of peers can offer practical advice and assistance, would also be part of a more inclusive approach. Where possible, interviewees recommended that post-graduate students live on campus, so as to be close to peers and resources. Formal training in the intra-personal competencies that most of the candidates had had to learn for themselves would help research students to bridge the different socio-academic divides that the study identified. There is a concomitant need for the support and training of supervisors to help them to understand why particular practices can enable or constrain postgraduate candidates' research journeys.

To be inclusive, postgraduate learning and knowledge-building should happen in a context of reciprocity and trust. In this regard, there is a long-overdue conversation that needs to take place in higher education about how candidates' 'own knowledge' might become a valued part of the postgraduate experience.

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